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THE ANCIENT PERSIAN CONCEPTION OF SALVATION ACCORDING TO THE AVESTA, OR BIBLE OF ZOROASTER

A. V. WILLIAMS JACKSON
Columbia University, New York City

Faith and works form the foundation of the doctrine of salvation in the Ancient Persian religion as in other established creeds. Belief in Ahura Mazdāh, or Ormazd, as the Supreme Deity, constituted the first step in "the Path of Righteousness," that meant redemption from sin. This article of faith was a cardinal point in the teachings of Zarathushtra, or Zoroaster, the Prophet of Ancient Iran, who flourished as early as the seventh century before the Christian Era, and whose doctrines, preserved in the Avesta, are still followed by some eleven thousand devoted adherents in Persia and about ninety thousand Parsis in India, their adopted home after the Muḥammadan conquest of Iran.

This quota of about a hundred thousand souls in all may seem numerically small in comparison with the number of devotees to other beliefs, but they have been known by their fruits, and have contributed in a very substantial manner, throughout the ages, to the advancement of the world toward the goal of ransom hereafter.

The religion of Zoroaster in general, together with the many points of resemblance which exist between it and Judaism and Christianity, have been often treated of by the present writer.¹ For that reason the particular discussion now offered may be confined solely to the subject in question, and further limited to its aspect during the earliest period, or that represented by the Avesta, or Sacred Book of Zoroastrianism. It may possibly be found feasible on some future occasion to develop the theme along kindred

¹ See, for example, "Avesta, the Bible of Zoroaster," *Biblical World*, June, 1893, I, 420-31; *ibid.*, "The Ancient Persian Doctrine of a Future Life," August, 1896, VIII, 149-63; and "Zoroastrianism and the Resemblances between It and Christianity," May, 1906, XXVII, 335-43; likewise, "Die iranische Religion," in Geiger and Kuhn's *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie*, pp. 612-708, Stuttgart, 1904.

lines relating to its phases during the successive ages of the Achaemenian Empire of Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes, and the following kingdoms of the Parthians and Sasanians, or, roughly speaking, through the thousand and more years from 550 B.C. to 650 A.D. when Persia came under Muslim rule through being conquered by Islam. However abridged and however imperfect the present sketch may be, it seeks to represent the main features of the doctrine of salvation as taught by Zoroaster in the earliest times.

A belief in the freedom of the will, the acknowledgment of man's ability to choose the right or to choose the wrong—and his consequent responsibility to his Creator—lies at the basis of the moral and ethical system of the Zoroastrian religion, which, above all, emphasizes the existence of the two warring principles of Good and Evil, personified as Ormazd and Ahriman. To guide man to the choice of right, and thus to assure his gaining eternal salvation hereafter, was the very purpose of Zoroaster's mission upon earth.¹

Purity alike of body and soul—a purity to be acquired through observing the sacred word of Ormazd as revealed by Zoroaster to his people—is in brief the means whereby salvation is to be won. "Purity is for man best for the birth hereafter (*yaoždāo mašyāi aipi-zāthem vahištā*)," exclaims the Prophet in one of his inspired Gāthās, or Avestan Psalms, touching on the future life.² This same utterance is reaffirmed again, and in fuller terms, from Ormazd's words on Zoroaster's lips in the priestly code of the *Vendīdād*, or *Vidēvdāt*, as follows:

Purity is for man best for the birth hereafter. That, O Zarathushtra, which is the Religion of the Worshipers of Mazdāh is purity for him who purifies his own soul by *good thoughts, good words, good deeds*.³

The special purity that comes through faith is therefore recognized as the initial step, or grade, leading to redemption.

¹ Cf., Geldner, article "Zoroaster," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. 10; Jackson, *A Hymn of Zoroaster*, pp. 38-41, Stuttgart and Boston, 1888.

² Avesta *Yasna* 48. 5; cf. *Vendīdād* 5. 21 (quoted in this connection). Among the three most recent interpretations of this passage and its *Vendīdād* parallel, see Geldner, *Religionsgeschichtliches Lesebuch*, p. 329, Tübingen, 1908; Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*, col. 1236 (s. v. "*Yaozdāh*"); Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta*, 1. 316 and 2. 73, Paris, 1892; and *idem*, *Zend-Avesta*, in Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East*, 2d ed., IV, 56; consult likewise, Mills, *Gāthās*, pp. 50-53, Leipzig, 1894.

³ See *Vd.* 5. 21, and compare also the conclusion of the present article.

To those worshipers "who win a good report"¹ for the life beyond, through piety in this life, is promised eternal felicity; but, on the contrary, the lot of sinners is to be lasting damnation. Such is the note with which Zarathushtra closes one of his Gāthic utterances, or psalmodic sermons, on Ormazd, Ahriman, and Man. Fired with the spark divine, which gives glimpses into the future and opens to the Seer a revelation of the Final Judgment, he exclaims:

Then, in sooth, will come to pass the annihilation of the host of Deceit (Satan); but those who win a Good Report will share in the hoped-for reward in the Good Dwelling of Vohu Manah (the Archangel of Good Thought), of Mazdāh (God), and of Asha (Righteousness). And if, O ye men, ye mark these doctrines which Mazdāh gave, namely the [future] welfare and the ill-fare—the long torment of the wicked and the salvation (*savā-*) of the righteous, then in accordance with these will there be felicity hereafter.²

The word *savā-* (fem., cf. *sava-*, masc., *savah-*, neut., and *savah-vant-*, adj.) which has been rendered in the previous paragraph by "salvation," is one of the cardinal words in the Avesta, occurring thus or in its cognates a score of times.³ Its literal meaning is "weal," "advantage," "benefit" (Germ. *Nützen, Vorteil—der ewige im andern Leben*), and it denotes in particular the eternal welfare hereafter, or salvation, the term itself being derived from the same verbal root, *sav-*, "to further," "promote," "benefit," "save," as that which forms the basis of the messianic word *Saoshyant*—"Savior," the Avestan designation of the Redeemer, to whose future coming Zoroastrianism looks forward.⁴

To the special idea implied by this word and its congeners (e.g., *savah-*) Zarathushtra leads up in the three opening stanzas of another Gāthā, a literal rendering of which would read nearly as follows:

According to his wish do I wish that unto him—to whomsoever Ahura Mazdāh ruling at will may grant it in accordance with his wish—there may come the power, with endurance, for maintaining Righteousness (Asha)—grant me this, O Ārmaitī (Archangel of Harmony and the Earth)—and the

¹ Ys. 30. 10, *yōi zazantī vanhāu sravahi*.

² Ys. 30. 10–11.

³ Cf. Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*, coll. 1561–1563, Strassburg, 1904.

⁴ Besides the references given above, consult especially Darmesteter, *Ormazd et Ahriman*, pp. 89–96, Paris, 1877.

rewards of Wealth and the Life of Good Thought (i.e., Heaven). And his shall be the best of all things, [for] according to his wish for Bliss shall man receive Bliss through Thy Wise and Most Holy Spirit, O Mazdāh, namely the blessings of Good Thought (the Archangel of Heaven), which Thou wilt give through Righteousness together with the felicity of a long life for all days. Then to something better than the good, shall that man attain who can teach us the straight paths of salvation (*savah-*) for this material life and for the spiritual, [yea] unto the true existences in which Ahura dwells.¹

In three similar stanzas, which form the opening of another Gāthā (Ys. 34), is again developed this notion of eternal welfare (*savah-*) as a part of the great concept of Salvation and Immortality—the latter two abstract ideas being especially personified as archangels under the name of Haurvatāt and Ameretāt. By etymological derivation the first of these divine abstracts (*Haurvatāt-*) denotes “Wholeness,” “Perfection,” “Saving Grace,” and hence “Salvation”; the second (*A-məretāt-*) literally signifies “Non-death,” and hence “Immortality.” The passages in question—for a number of others might be cited in connection with the association of these two archangelic personifications with the general idea of salvation (*savah-*), may be rendered almost verbatim as follows:

In accordance with what deed, with what word, with what act of worship, O Mazdāh, Thou wilt bestow Immortality, and Thy Righteousness, and the Kingdom of Salvation (*Haurvatāt-*)—in accordance with the fullness of these are we to give unto thee, O Ahura. And then, with the thought of the Holy Spirit and the deed of the good man, whose soul is in harmony with Righteousness, do ye deposit all these, together with the songs of praise, in the vestibule of [lit. in] Your prayer, O Mazdāh. Then, O Ahura, will we give offering unto Thee and unto Righteousness, who through Good Thought are perfecting all

¹ Ys. 43. 1-3. To be observed in these three stanzas, as constantly in the Gāthās, is the recurrent personification of abstract ideas as archangels around the throne of Ahura Mazdāh. Four of the sacred seven, including Mazdāh, are directly mentioned, namely, Vohu Manah, “Good Thought,” Asha, “Righteousness,” Spenta Ārmaiti, “Holy Harmony,” together with Spenta Mainyu, “The Holy Spirit,” as an emanation of Mazdāh. On the subject of these archangelic personifications, compare the present writer in *The Monist*, IX, 167-8, Chicago, 1899; and *idem*, in Geiger and Kuhn’s *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie*, II, 634-40. Further contributions on the general subject will be found in the various writings of Darmesteter, Mills, de Harlez, Geldner, Casartelli, Horn, Lehmann, Söderblom, Oldenburg, Reichelt, Gray, and Dhalla; most recently in Moulton, *Early Religious Poetry of Persia*, pp. 57-64, Cambridge, 1911.

beings in the Kingdom. Assured through all [times], O Mazdāh, is the salvation (*savah-*) that belongs to You-and-Yours (i.e., to God and the Archangels).¹

The same tone echoes in still another of the Prophet's revelations and enunciations, with words both of prayer and of promise for those who are to enjoy final beatitude with Ormazd when the Kingdom shall be established:

First of all, therefore, O Mazdāh, reveal unto me the Kingdom of Desire, belonging to Righteousness and to Thee, O Ārmaitī (Harmony); grant this through Good Thought in answer to our prayer for salvation (*savah-*).²

In the same Gāthā we hear again,

This salvation (*savah-*) of Yours may Ye all, Mazdāh, Righteousness with Good Thought and Harmony—in accordance with the words by which she is addressed—grant unto us, (as Ye are) bestowing help when worshiped with devotion.³

Still another appeal, yet marked alike by humility and filled with the hope for the coming of the Kingdom and the ultimate attainment of salvation, is made in the following stanza:

By these boons [that are prayed for] may we not offend You, O Mazdāh Ahura, and the Mind that is Best (i.e., Vohu Manah), for we have striven for the establishment of Your praises; and Ye are swiftest to promote the Kingdom of Desire and its salvations (plur. of *savah-*).⁴

Supplementary to this expression of homage, just quoted, may be cited a portion of a prayer from the Younger Avesta (*Ys.* 60. 2), which implores, among other blessings, the establishment of the

¹ *Ys.* 34. 1-3. So may be rendered *Xšmāvasu savō*, "salvation of You-and-Yours," including Ahura Mazdāh and the Amesha Spentas. With the version here given of these three stanzas may be compared the German translation by Bartholomae, *Die Gatha's der Avesta*, p. 42, Strassburg, 1905; by Geldner, in Bezzenbeger's *Beiträge z. Idg. Sprachen*, XV, 253; also the French renderings by de Harlez, *Avesta traduit*, p. 331, Paris, 1881, and Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta*, I, 252-54, Paris; and in English by Mills, *The Five Zarathushtrian Gāthās*, pp. 131-35, Leipzig, 1894.

² *Ys.* 51. 2. Notice again the personification of the archangelic abstractions as active beings—*Xšaθra*, *Aša*, *Ārmaiti*, *Vohu Manah*.

³ *Ys.* 51. 20. On this difficult stanza consult the renderings by the scholars above mentioned, including again de Harlez, *Avesta traduit*, p. 365; Mills, *Gāthās*, pp. 368-69.

⁴ *Ys.* 28. 9. With this rendering of the stanza compare the version by Casartelli, *Leaves from an Eastern Garden*, p. 26, published by St. Williams Press, Market Weighton, Yorkshire, England, 1908; consult also the several translations in the works of Geldner, Bartholomae, de Harlez, Mills, Darmesteter, alluded to above.

common weal (*savah-*), as significant with salvation. The paragraph runs:

Unto this clan may Righteousness come, and the Kingdom [come], and salvation (*savah-*), and glory, and the pre-eminence of this law which belongs to Ahura and to Zarathushtra.¹

The same union of everlasting weal and the glory divine, or (to translate literally), "the glory created by Mazdāh and the salvation created by Mazdāh," is found in several other passages in the Younger Avesta, and closely associated with the two is the conception of Righteousness.²

This great concept of "Righteousness" (*Asha*, or *Arta*) personified as the Archangel of Holiness, as referred to above, is the standard to be maintained on earth in order to attain to final beatitude in Heaven. The word *asha-* (*arta-*), derived from the root *ar-*, "to fit," "be in order," denotes the eternal fitness of things that are in accord with the Divine Order (*Asha*)—hence "Righteousness." It occurs hundreds of times in the Avesta.³ To live "in accordance with Righteousness" (*Ašāt hacā*) is the means of spiritual grace which is inculcated by the Avesta as the medium for advancing and obtaining the Kingdom of Heaven.⁴ The man who does this is *ašavan*—"the righteous," and to all such is given the promise of everlasting bliss. In definite words Zoroaster holds out the assurance that he himself will be the leader of souls thus ransomed, over the Bridge of Judgment. His promise is thus:

Whosoever—man or woman—shall give unto me those things in life which Thou hast recognized as best (namely), the reward of Righteousness through Good Thought, and those whom I will accompany to praise of You—with all these will I advance over the Bridge of Judgment.⁵

¹ Ys. 60. 2, and compare F. Wolff, *Avesta übersetzt*, p. 84, Strassburg, 1910.

² For the combination *xvarəñō Mazdadātəm-* and *savō Mazdadātəm*, see Ys. 2. 14; *Str.* 2. 9; Ys. 1. 14; *Ny.* 5. 5; and cf. *V sp.* 11. 13.

³ Cf. Bartholomae, *Airwb.*, coll. 229-259, for *aša-*, *ašavan-*, and cognates.

⁴ The word for the "Kingdom," or that sovereign rule of the good which is to bring about the final triumph of good at the end of the world, is *Xšaθra-*, "Sovereignty," and is referred to unnumbered times in the Avesta, especially in connection with the new dispensation after the day of judgment.

⁵ Ys. 46. 11. For references to the Bridge of Judgment (*Cinvatō Pəratu*) see Bartholomae, *Airwb.*, coll. 596-97.

A study of the hundred and more passages in which *Asha* occurs, as already indicated, would prove conclusively that the designation signifies not alone the ceremonial fitness in accordance with the outward order of the ritual and its observance, but, above all, that inward holiness of spirit which makes for righteousness and for final deliverance. Limitations of space exclude any amplification here upon this point in its bearing upon the idea of salvation, but every one who seeks to convey a notion of the main tenets of Zoroastrianism must postulate "Righteousness" as paramount among the dogmas of the faith in regard to the future emancipation.

Reference has already been made to the "path" that leads to salvation through righteousness.¹ Out of a large number of passages, which might be cited in Zoroaster's own words, a single Gāthic stanza may suffice for quotation. The Seer looking with apocalyptic vision into the future foresees Heaven, God, the Archangels (*Amesha Spentas*), and those joys that are led up to by the way of direct Obedience. In the first person he exclaims:

I who at the End will invoke Thy Sraosha (Angel of Obedience) as the greatest of all, after having attained the Long Life in the Kingdom of Good Thought through Righteousness, [yea] unto the Straight Paths amid which Mazdāh Ahura dwelleth.²

Of like character is the Messianic reference in another Gāthā to—

the Straight Paths, namely the Savior's Religion, which Ahura gave.³

As inferred at the outset and seen above, scores of passages extol the saving grace that is to be obtained through the religion. The word for "religion" is *Daenā* and literally means "Insight," "Conscience"—the means whereby redemption is to be obtained.⁴ To quote only a single one of Zarathushtra's old Gāthic stanzas on

¹ Av. *paθ-*, *padā-*, *panīay-*, "path, the Path."

² Ys. 33. 5. For the context, the stanza preceding and following this verse should be compared.

³ Ys. 53. 2, *-ərəzūš paθō, yām daēnām Ahurō Saošyantiō dadāi.*

⁴ For a list of Avestan passages referring to the Religion of the Worshipers of Mazdāh, see Bartholomae, *Airwb.*, coll. 662-67, 1160-61.

the subject of faith and its promised rewards for him who is hallowed by righteousness:

This holy man, through his knowledge of Ārmaiti (Archangel of Concord and the Earth) and through his words, his deeds, and his Religion, hallows the Kingdom by Good Thought; [to him], I pray, may Mazdāh Ahura grant the true reward.¹

Knowledge, belief, faith, or however we are to translate the Avestan word *cisti-*, synonymous with religious devotion, is a kindred means of redemption. An assurance of this is found among the early utterances of Zarathushtra; the stanza glorifies the devout religious conviction of his patron, Vishtāspa (the Constantine of the Faith):

This Faith, together with the Kingship of the Community, hath Kavi Vishtāspa accepted through the Paths of Good Thought (Vohu Manah, the Archangel)—which Faith Ahura Mazdāh hath conceived through Righteousness. So is It to come to appearance in accordance with our wish.²

The quotations thus far given have been drawn largely from the Gāthās as containing the *ipsissima verba* of Zarathushtra in the metrical stanzas used in his preaching. Hardly less authentic, though confined to the so-called Younger Avesta, or later portion of the Zoroastrian Scriptures, are some of the portions in the *Vendīdād*, or *Vidēvdāt*, "Laws against the Demons." This species of Iranian Pentateuch, which forms a third of the Avesta in its present extent, professes to give, through Zoroaster's lips, Ormazd's own injunctions on the subject of purification of body and soul, and of preserving the purity of the sacred elements, fire, earth, and water.³ The greatest defilement arises through contact with the dead, as death is Ahriman's supremest triumph. The dead body could not be buried, nor burned, nor thrown into the water—as such an act would result in the defilement of one of those elements. It must be exposed on the Dakhma, or Tower of Silence.⁴ To

¹ Ys. 51. 21; in connection with this rendering consult especially Geldner, *Religionsgeschichtliches Lesebuch—die Zoroastrische Religion*, p. 334, Tübingen, 1908.

² Ys. 51. 16.

³ For the passages in the Avesta relating to purification (*yaoždāθra-*) and to purifying (*yaoždā-* and its derivations) see Bartholomae, *Airwb.*, coll. 233-36.

⁴ Vd. 6. 44-51.

dispose of it otherwise would be to incur mortal sin;¹ such a deed remains inexpiable in the eyes of the true believer.² But if the perpetrator were a non-believer, and could be brought to confess the Religion of Mazdāh, and not to sin again, the very power of the religion would remove even so unpardonable a transgression, as this, of interring a corpse in the earth, together with all other trespasses that may have stood in the way of the doer's salvation; for,

In behalf of those who profess the Religion of the Worshipers of Mazdāh, it [the Religion] removeth sin, if they perpetrate unlawful deeds not again; for the Religion of the Worshipers of Mazdāh, O Spitama Zarathushtra, taketh away the bond [of sin] from him that maketh a profession of it; it taketh away [the sin of] breach of trust; it taketh away the slaying of a righteous man; it taketh away [the sin of] burying a corpse; it taketh away an unatoneable sin; it taketh away sin that needeth hard expiation; [yea] it taketh away all sins that one doeth.³

Special rites of purification, both for now and for hereafter, must be undergone by the one who has become defiled by contact with death; otherwise his soul would stand in jeopardy for the future. The man thus contaminated must first undergo a particular ceremonial ablution to cleanse him in part from his pollution; he must furthermore make an appeal for absolution to free him from his transgression; and he must submit himself to be heavily castigated (the number of stripes being duly prescribed) besides doing other acts of piety, meet for deliverance.⁴

It is not further necessary to classify here the voluntary and involuntary acts, which, if committed, would involve hazarding the hope of salvation. The Vendīdād abounds in them. To choose only so slight an illustration as the misdeed of killing a water-dog,

¹ On the general conception of sin according to Zoroastrianism see Bishop L.C. Casartelli, "L'idée du péché chez les Indo-Iraniens de l'antiquité," in *Compte rendu du quatrième congrès scientifique international des catholiques*, pp. 1-14, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1898.

² So *Vd.* 3. 39-40.

³ *Vd.* 3. 40-41. Similar in its tone of glorification is a passage in the fifth chapter of the *Vendīdād* (*Vd.* 5. 21-26) which glorifies the Religion as surpassing all things "in greatness and goodness and beauty" and which accredits to the priest the power to omit a part of the penalty incurred by transgression, provided that the sinner truly repents, and which allows that if he have no other trespass to expiate, then "the man has absolution through repentance for ever and ever"—*paītiṭam ahe narš yavaēca yavaēīdāeaca*.

⁴ See, for instance, *Vd.* 8. 97-109; and *Vd.* 8. 81-96.

or otter (*udra*)—ten thousand stripes must be undergone by the doer, countless loads of wood for consecration must be offered to the sacred fire, libations must be poured, and large gifts presented to members of the priestly caste, the warrior class, and the husbandmen “as atonement for the soul—” *urune ciθīm*.¹

Repentance (*paititi*-, *paitiia*-), penance (*ciθā*-), and expiation through confession of faith (*āpərəti*-, *āstūiti*-), in addition to the outward acts of reparation already described, constitute the main foundation upon which a hope for making reparation for sins against the divine order may be built. It is thus at the outset that the sinner, “whose body is forfeit” (*tanuṣərəθa*-) may have an outlook of the possibility of atonement for transgression.²

Passages upon passages from other parts of the Avesta might be cited as incidentally conveying an idea of the ways in which salvation may be won. The entire book of the Yasna, “Sacrifice,” which makes up another third of the Avesta, is devoted to the ceremonial performance of the ritual and to the benefits which accrue therefrom. Worship, prayer, propitiation, and glorification of Ahura Mazdāh and the divine powers associated with Him are meritorious acts that are ultimately to be directly associated with the soul’s redemption.³ In the Yashts, or “offerings by Praises,” the note of divine invocation, praise, and thanksgiving as a means of grace may be recorded in the same connection. In the invocation of the Visprat, “All the Lords” the implication is similar; and other minor divisions of the Avesta, like the Nyāishes, or “Liturgies,” the Āfrīngān, or “Blessings,” ring with a kindred chord regarding the ultimate attainment of the weal hereafter.

But no better summary of Zoroaster’s doctrine on the whole general subject can be given than that in the three words which form the keynote of his teachings; they are these

Good thoughts, good words, good deeds—*humata, hukhta, hvarshta*.

¹ See *Vd.* 14. 1-18.

² For references in the Avesta to repentance (*paititi*-, *paitiia*-), penance (*ciθā*-), and expiation through confession of faith (*āpərəti*-, *āstūiti*-) see Bartholomae, *Airwb.*, coll. 329, 340, 585, 829, 1235; and for *tanuṣərəθa*-, col. 636.

³ Cf. *Av. yasnāica vahmāica xšnaoθrāica frasastayaēca* in numberless passages in the Yasna and elsewhere.

In hundreds of places throughout the Avesta occurs the Prophet's command to live up to this triad as a standard for this world in order to attain the next; these three words constitute the pith of Zoroaster's teaching regarding salvation from the standpoint of ethics. "Good thoughts, good words, good deeds," which a man has accumulated during his lifetime, form the three stages by which his soul shall mount hereafter into the mansions of Paradise. "Evil thoughts, evil words, evil deeds," on the other hand, make up the grades through which the soul of the wicked descends into the damnation of Hell.

A creed that holds these ideals of good thoughts, good words, good deeds, together with faith as a mainspring of salvation; which teaches a belief in a supreme deity, of angels and archangels, as opposed to the powers of darkness; which postulates that man is a free agent to choose the right; which inculcates the doctrine of the final triumph of good, the coming of a savior, the resurrection of the dead, a final judgment and a life hereafter—such a faith deserves to claim a right to occupy an important place in the study of the great historic religions of the world; and it is hoped that there may later be found an opportunity to develop further its teaching on the topic of salvation during the ages represented by the Achaemenian, Parthian, and Sasanian Empires in relation to the world-furtherance of mankind.